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ABSTRACT

Administrator understanding of the implications of black separatism requires recognizing that black students have an emerging sense of self-worth and a belief that there is no opportunity for them to achieve success within the system. To deal effectively with student demands for separatism, administrators must understand the full meaning of their behavior and rigorously analyze each situation on the basis of the best interests of students involved. (Author/MLF)

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HOW DOES A SCHOOL ADMINISTRATOR DEAL WITH BLACK SEPARATISM IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Address by
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Meeting of the A. A. S. A. at Atlantic City, New Jersey
Monday, February 22, 1971
2:30 P. M.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN:

Today, I appear before you with the assignment of sharing with you some of my thoughts as an administrator on dealing with Black Separatism in a public school setting.

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A great deal, if not all, of the material presented here represents an effort to get across the views of students about Black Separatism.

I have found a great reluctance at times for the adults in the school community to talk unemotionally about Black Separatism. Usually the adult posture is either that it is all right or that it is all wrong.

There seems to be great difficulty in determining what the message is coming from students who present demands to the school administration. We can only deal properly with that which we can understand.

If I am able to help you understand just a little better the implications of Black Separatism, this school administrator will have accomplished his aim -- to put in perspective some of the challenges you and I are confronted with - "back home." I feel very strongly that the understanding on the part of the administrator of what really is going on is more crucial in dealing with Black Separatism than any other area of administrator-student relations.

If we all return to our bases aware that these are massive problems still to be faced and some of us abandon our "ostrich positions" then we can hope for some of the "Impossible Dream" to become a reality.

My remarks today may not be particularly pleasant. Though in plain language, many of my thoughts will be easier for you to hear, than for you to understand. What follows is said in the conviction that less than candor today would waste our time and constitute a disservice to you.

I do not hope to change in this brief time, the feelings of a life time. I can only hope in these few minutes to provide thoughtful provocation and perhaps self examination and a few non-defensive thoughts in the next day or two.

Present racial attitudes pose one of the greatest dangers to the American society in American History. The danger is not only in what it does to black students but the reaction it evokes from whites. The question of race now stands before us as that one question that may decide the fate of our nation.

My remarks today will be limited to only one manifestation of change: "Black Separatism and the School Administrator:"

Black separatism for some is a desire for separate black schools or separate school systems which would assure educational experiences unique to blacks, run by blacks, for black children. For others, and I feel the majority of black students fall in this class, Black separatism is a growing realization of the value of Blackness.

It's a human cry, somehow saying "I am here -- I want you to recognize that I am here -- I want you to know that I have feelings -- I want you to know that I am proud of being black -- I want you to know that my goal in life is not to become somthing else -- it is to be respected for the things that I presently have, not necessarily for those things which I may acquire that will make me "acceptable." I want to be treated like a person of value "now."

With the emerging sense of self-worth there has also been a hard look at the efforts to integrate some urban school systems. All too often efforts to integrate the schools have led to an exodus

of white students. This happened in the District of Columbia. As a result, black children got to know white adult authority figures more often than white student peers. Consequently, they are faced with the unknown when they deal on a personal basis with white people much in the same way that the white businessman is in foreign territory when he drives through a black ghetto on his way home from work. Ignorance leads to fearful myths.

For the black student there is also the belief that the System has failed him. The belief that there is no opportunity for him to achieve success within its framework. He has the feeling that something outside of the present System (or separation inside) holds some relevance for him.

Demands of black people for the opportunity to operate separately must perplex many people. But, when we listen carefully to the black (and not-so-militant) student activists, we must be able to recognize sincere and understandable reasons for many of their proposals.

The answer is complicated. Basically, it relates to a discovering of self, of individuality, even of personhood on the

part of black people.

The first point school administrators must understand, in order to deal effectively with student demands for separatism, is the growing disinterest, or disenchantment, of the black student population with the concept of integration which calls for cultural changes on the part of blacks. If the administrator is white, he must, through hard introspection, analyze his reactions to this phenomenon. Does it evoke a sense of threat, of fear, of hurt, or of anger? Only by being honest with himself can the administrator manage his feelings sufficiently to make objective, rational decisions based solely on the best interests of students involved.

The second point administrators must understand to deal effectively with student demands for separatism is the full meaning of the behavior. Case by case, certain questions must be raised before alternative administrative decisions can be evaluated.

1. What motivated the behavior? What are the conditions that make it necessary for the student to make this demand? What is the student, by his behavior, attempting to express?

2. Which causative factors are unnecessary or unjust, and within the power of the administration to remedy?

3. What are the consequences in terms of the student welfare of alternative administrative decisions regarding disposition of the student demands?

The key to analysis of situations of this nature lies in this question: "What is the student, by his behavior, trying to tell us?" Among many possibilities, the student demand may be a deliberate attempt to make white people feel threatened. The threat may be intended for students, teachers, administrators, or even the surrounding community. When the student demands separatism for this purpose, any response approaching overaction positively reinforces this mode of student behavior, thereby tending to increase its frequency. By becoming "up-tight," the administrator demonstrates his inability to handle symptomatic behavior.

Where the demand is for separate social organization, it may reflect an honest desire to fulfill a need based on cultural differences. The administrator must read accurately the message

from his black students and take constructive initiatives addressed to needs so expressed.

In other circumstances, the demand may reflect a reluctance of black students to compete with whites. When reluctance to compete is identified as a causative factor, the administrator must actively develop programs and activities to enhance the self-confidence of his black clientele, but in doing so must guard against the trappings of condescension.

Failure to act constructively on this expression of need, in an environment of forced academic competition, can lead only to increasingly frequent and severe student disorders. A demand for separatism, in these circumstances, is no more than the glacier's tip.

Few generalizations can be made on the significance of this form of student behavior. The message varies according to the circumstances. It can be said, however, that the literal reading of the demand is the least important element of the total message. Always the demand is an expression of student need with definite

implications for administrative action. Effectiveness of the school administrator will depend on his sensitivity to this expression and his capability for objective decision making. He must rigorously analyze each situation on the singular basis of the best interests of students involved. He must initiate activities and programs addressed to student needs so expressed. To do this, he cannot allow the style of student expression to interfere with his reading of the message. Nor can he allow personal reactions of hurt, fear, or anger to interfere with his administrative judgment.

My remarks to this point have described aspects of black thinking. To round out this consideration of the administrator and black separatism, reflect for a moment on some prevalent white attitudes toward black separatism.

The American experience outside of the school building is less that of a melting pot than of an experience of fierce struggle for economic, political, and social gain by organized national groups. What then, can explain the great uproar when black students begin talking about doing what every other minority has done? -- advance collectively their own cause.

There is an inconsistent quality of thinking on the part of many persons about the issue of black separatism, as opposed to non-black separatism.

I make this particular point only because it is essential that administrators - both white and black -- must understand, in order to deal effectively in this sensitive area, not only their students, but equally themselves. Because their every decision must be based exclusively on the best interests of their students, they must be capable of weeding out from the decision-making process their non-professional reactions. In their analyses of difficulut situations, administrators must not confuse personal hang-ups with the realties presented.

I am suggesting, then that the issue of black separatism will be put in its proper perspective through an improved understanding of one's personal reactions to student behavior.

To illustrate where my thinking eventually leads, I will categorize a few expressions of black awareness as to their legitimacy within the schools.

Certain manifestations of the self-discovery, while understandable, cannot be condoned under any circumstances by school administrators. Included in this category is all behavior detrimental to the health or safety of other students, or of disruption of the educational process.

Legitimate expressions of emerging black awareness, on the other hand, will include:

Rejection of the melting pot image of this nation.

Rejection of assimilation which means accepting another culture as an ultimate goal.

Striving for sense of community among black people.

Search for historical roots and appreciation.

Demand for full participation in the decision-making process insofar as it affects the lives of black people.

Legitimate expressions of black awareness include, at a higher level of generality, demands for social justice now, demands for parity of economic and political power now, and demands for quality public education now.

The task of the school administrator is not merely to diffuse explosive situations. This is sometimes difficult for the general public to accept for they see this immediate goal as the goal. The administrator must assess the legitimacy of those forces he must contend with and their manifestations, and to establish structures through which student energies are transmitted (rather than suppressed) into creative and constructive undertakings within the educational program.

The administrator does not have the luxury of dealing with students solely on an ideological front. He is also confronted with a changing clientele. He must operate the schools each day dealing with students as they are -- not as we would like them to be.

As administrators let us pledge ourselves to change those conditions in the school which foster any type of racial separatism.

Our acts need not be momentous or heroic, for, the man who removes mountains begins by carrying away small stones.

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